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Social media and populism: an elective affinity?

Paolo Gerbaudo

In the aftermath of Trump's election news media commentators argued that social media were decisive in his narrow victory over Hillary Clinton. Commentators have looked at a number of factors that are said to have favoured Donald Trump's digital prowess. Some have focused on the incendiary style of his tweets which often conclude with emotionally charged exclamations such as: "Sad!", "Very Sad!", "So Sad!", "Bad!", "Be Honest!", "I WILL FIX IT!". Others have pointed to the role played by social media as conduit for "fake news", deliberately false news items that were instrumental in fuelling the negative campaign against Hillary Clinton. Others still have highlighted the data-driven character of Brexit and US campaigns and the support lent by data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica to identify strategic sections of the electorate to be targeted by populist messages.

These phenomena are an example of a broader trend, which could be described as the elective affinity between social media and populism, which means that social media appear to have provided platforms for populists to invoke the support of ordinary people against the liberal establishment that has supposedly victimised them. This phenomenon is significantly not seen only among rightwing populists as Donald Trump and Nigel Farage, but also among leftwing populist movements such as the Bernie Sanders campaign in the US and the rise of Podemos in Spain, both of which been equally capable of using social media to their advantage. What makes social media such a propitious space for the rise of populist movements? And what is the new form of populism that emerges out of the encounter between social media and populism?

In this paper I put forward some points towards an explanation of the apparent affinity between social media and populism. I argue that while social media have unwittingly become spaces that lend themselves to the populist yearning for representing the unrepresented, and providing a voice to a voiceless people. This does not have to do simply with the technical affordances of social media, but also with the meanings that have been associated to them, and the way in which their rise to public prominence has coincided with a phase of profound economic and political upheaval questioning the legitimacy of the neoliberal order. This connection between social media and populism can be appreciated at two levels: opinion-building and movement-building, and the role acquired by social media as the people's voice, and as a way to rally the people.

First, the design of social media as alternative media where ordinary people can express themselves has provided a suitable venue for populist movements to counter the perceived pro-establishment bias of mainstream news media, so that alternative media channels capable of intercepting popular anger have risen in importance. Second, the aggregative functionalities of social media, embedded in their algorithmic architecture and their "filter bubble" tendencies, has allowed disgruntled individuals embracing ideas regarded as improper by liberal common sense to find each other and form online crowds, which have played a crucial role in providing militant support for anti-establishment candidates, as seen for example in the #Gamergate community support of Donald Trump's presidential campaign.

Thus, it can be said that from a political perspective social media are channels that have slipped from the hands of their creators, large digital corporations as Facebook and Twitter whose support towards the neoliberal agenda is evident, but which have found themselves hosting conversations whose political content raises a fundamental challenge to neoliberal ideology. This populist hi-jacking of social media has ambivalent implications, as it appears to be equally amenable to the rightwing and hateful populism of the likes of Donald Trump and Nigel Farage, and the hopeful and progressive populism of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn.

Populism in a digital era

Populism is without doubt the most hotly debated issue in contemporary politics, a question that has in recent years attracted an enormous amount of commentary both in academia and the media (Panizza, 2012, Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007). The rise of a number of populist phenomena, Trump and Sanders, the 5 Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain, Le Pen in France and Nigel Farage in the UK, has led many to argue that we now find ourselves in a "populist moment", i.e. a historical phase dominated by the rise of populist formations that pose a challenge to the neoliberal

order that had dominated the political consensus politics for the previous three decades. Populism manifests its ambivalent character by manifesting itself on the Right and on the Left of the political spectrum, pursuing radically different visions of society, yet appearing to share common populist traits, visible in their anti-establishment attitude, in their claim to represent ordinary people, and in their relinquishing of some of the key tenets of neoliberal ideology.

To capture the nature of this transversal populist logic and explore the current digital manifestations of populism, it is imperative to go beyond the reductive and pejorative understanding of populism that have common currency among mainstream commentators in recent years. Populism here becomes a catch-all label to refer to all those political phenomena that are considered to be dangerous, irrational and demagogic; populism as a politics that appeals to the basest sentiments of the populace, makes demagogic promises and panders to imaginary fears (Taggart, 2005). While this definition no doubt captures some aspects of the populist right represented by the likes of Trump and Farage and their xenophobic discourse, it does not address the root causes behind the current surge in popularity of populist movements, and their roots in the failings of the neoliberal system. Furthermore, this view ignores how populism can be used towards emancipatory and progressive aims, as exemplified by the rise of leftwing populism both in the UK and the US. As it was noted by the *New York Times* "the People who turn up at Sanders and Trump rallies are wed, across the aisle, in bonds of populist unrest". So how is it possible that populism can be used towards both progressive and regressive ends? What is the common logic that is shared by leftwing and rightwing populist movements?

To address this issue, it is necessary to understand the transversal political logic of populism, which centres on the affirmation of the principle of popular sovereignty, precisely in those political contexts where the principle appears to be in question. Key for a perceptive understanding of populism is the work of Ernesto Laclau. He famously argued that populism is a political logic that involves an appeal to the entirety of the political community against a common enemy, and in particular against unresponsive political elites (2005). However, the unifying appeal can take differing forms according to the political orientation of a given populist movement. In the populist right, it tends to take highly exclusionary and xenophobic forms, whereby the people is constructed in opposition to the Other, and in particular migrants and ethnic and religious minorities. In leftwing populism instead, the unity of the People is constructed via the opposition against immoral privilege, as embodied by greedy bankers, rogue entrepreneurs and corrupt politicians accused of exploiting the people (Author, 2015).

The populist rhetoric rallying the People against the establishment seems to have found a propitious space on social media. Bartlett and others have shown how populist movements can use social media as means of recruiting people who previously were at the margins of politics (Bartlett et al. 2013). Sven Engesser and colleagues have highlighted the fact that the rhetoric of populism finds an amenable space on social media, and that online populism tends to display the following features: "emphasizing the sovereignty of the people"; "advocating for the people; attacking the elites"; "ostracizing the others"; "invoking the heartlands" (2015). In my own work I have argued that the interactive features of social networks and the system of informal voting embedded in the social media architecture have provided populist movements with a channel to vent their anger at elites and make loud calls for new forms of direct democracy, which constitutes a typical populist demand (2014).

Despite these analyses, we are still far from possessing a convincing theory explaining the affinity between social media and populism. This phenomenon appears as something of an enigma for a number of reasons. First of all, populism has long been considered typical of backward societies struggling to deal with modernisation and urbanisation, viz. agrarian populism in the US and urban populism in Latin America- Conversely, social media are an expression of advanced societies, thus making the affinity between them and populism an odd development that needs to be explained. Secondly, social media have usually been seen as expressions of the culture of hyperindividualism, and thus more closely connected with neoliberalism and its cult of spontaneity, self-promotion and individual interest, than to the collective manifestations of populism.

In regard to the first question it can be argued that while often displaying an anti-modernist vein, many populist movements in history were also characterised by strongly modernising and innovative traits. For instance, Charles Postel has argued that the People's Party in the US, far from simply rejecting technological developments of the Second Industrial Revolution, it aspired to a more beneficial version of technological innovation (2007). Commenting on Latin American populist movements, sociologist Alain Touraine argued that populism was "a modernizing movement, but it resists stoutly

against the dispossession of peoples and territories dominated from afar by a distant master" (1983: 20).

Contemporary populist movements have emerged in a historical period marked on the one hand by deep economic crisis that is affecting large sections of the population, significantly worsening their living conditions, and, on the other hand, by rapid and highly disruptive technological innovation, which is redefining the way in which people communicate and work. Similarly to previous waves of technological innovation, this opened a major gap in wealth and power between ordinary people and economic and political elites (Eisenstein, 1980). The rise of digital populism needs to be understood as the product of these two trends, since they have opened a space for populist movements to appeal to digitally connected but politically disgruntled electorates.

In regard to the second question, I will seek to demonstrate that hyperindividualism dominating social media has produced a condition of atomisation, with politicized individuals who do not feel represented by any organisation. This situation has ultimately provided a suitable terrain for populist rhetoric which is centrally concerned with binding and fusing atomised individuals in the collective body of the people. The argument will be developed in two steps. First, we will look at the way social media have come to be perceived as the voice for the underdog and the unrepresented in opposition to mainstream news media, in ways that are coherent with populism's anti-establishment orientation. Second, we will look at how social media provide internal means of crowd-building allowing politically disaffected individuals to find one another and unite around recognised symbols and leaders.

Social media as the People's voice

Social media have come to provide a suitable channel for populist appeals, because of the way in which they have come to be understood as a platform for the voice of the people in opposition to allegedly corrupt mainstream news media, in cahoots with the financial and political establishment. The allure of social media as people's media is already visible in the discourse of the Web 2.0, and the way it was presented as a space in which ordinary people and "amateurs" could express themselves, thus going beyond the old model of public, broadcasted communication in which only professional communicators and journalists could express their opinions. Obviously this narrative is at loggerheads with the fact that social media platforms are by and large controlled by capitalist corporations such as Google and Facebook, whose profit-driven agenda seems to have little to do with the people's interests. Nevertheless, it is apparent that social media have in fact become outlets for alternative and citizen journalism, in which a number of voices explicitly or implicitly antagonize mainstream news media, which are portrayed as not covering and representing the issues and views held by a growing portion of the population (Meraz, 2009, Farinosi and Trere, 2014). Furthermore, Internet is where journalists go to add a "vox populi" element to their reports and comments, often prefaced with expressions such as "the prevalent opinion on social media is...". All these phenomena have contributed to generating a perception of social media as being the people's voice, a space that is reputed to be more authentic than the one dominated by mainstream media.

Indeed, the veneer acquired by social media as a people's voice needs to be understood in connection with the criticisms of mainstream news media. Attacks against mainstream media, often shortened as MSM, are a common feature of many online conversations connected with populist movements, as are invitations to people to show certain news items, based on the premise that the MSM "does not want you to know", whereby the sharing of a certain news content is framed as an attempt to break free from the censorship supposedly enforced by mainstream media on certain types of political content. On the Right such opposition to dominant media discourse is often expressed in the form of rightwing activists attacking the political correctness sustained by mainstream news media. This has been most glaringly seen in Donald Trump's constant attacks against the press. On the left instead what is attacked is "neoliberal discourse", i.e. a discourse seen as instrumental to the maintenance and reproduction of neoliberal free-market ideology. A manifestation of this anti-MSM attitude is the all-out attack on the authority of experts. Michael Gove, one of the leading advocates of Leave vote on Brexit, famously went on record for saying that people in the UK "got tired of listening to experts" in a televised debate.

This anti-mainstream news media attitude reflects the sharp drop in trust towards media that has been experienced since the economic crisis (Carr et al., 2014). As measured by a number of polls conducted across OECD countries, mainstream news media have the same abysmal level of trust

registered by political parties, with 60% of the population in the US distrusting them (Morales, 2012). According to the Pew Research Center, only 18% of Americans have a lot of trust in national news organizations. What we are facing here is what could be described as a crisis of authority engulfing mainstream media, to refer to the term adopted by Antonio Gramsci (1971) to describe the loss of legitimacy of the Church and other traditional institutions in the interwar period. Mainstream media have reacted to attacks on their authoritativeness by decrying them as manifestations of political irrationality. However, growing popular hostility to established media sources stems from their signal failure in predicting the 2008 crisis, an event that put media in the role of the “the watchdog that didn’t bark”, to cite David Starkman (2014). A growing section of the population has thus come to perceive mainstream media as agents that respond to the agenda of their super-rich owners and their political allies, rather than to the real needs and interests of the public (McChesney, 2015).

This perception goes a long way to explaining why the heavy barrage of criticism levelled by mainstream media outlets against a number of populist politicians from Donald Trump to Jeremy Corbyn seems to have often backfired, providing them with a reputation as anti-establishment mavericks disfavoured by pro-establishment media. It also provides some explanation as to why it was so easy for Donald Trump to deflect the accusation of having used fake news websites to his own advantage, deploring large mainstream news media as CNN for being themselves purveyors of fake news.

The crisis of authority of mainstream media chimes well with the prevailing spirit of social media, and their logic of “user-generated content”, predicated under the assumption that anybody regardless of their professional qualification or expertise can express their own opinion on any subject. This understanding has been at the heart of a number of new populist media that have presented themselves as more authentic representations of the truth and of the people’s will. The most famous and notorious example of this kind of populist media is undoubtedly Breitbart, a news site posting incendiary opinion and alternative news items, which has become a platform for the alt-right, providing the hardcore of support for Trump’s election campaign, whose main editor, Steve Bannon, was appointed as White House Chief Strategist. Breitbart has been characteristic of rightwing populist media, by spewing hatred against women and muslims, as well as flaming rhetoric against “globalism” and “political correctness”. However, also left-wing movements have nurtured their own populist media. The ground for the launch of Podemos in Spain was prepared by the online TV channel *La Tuerka*, in which many of the key leaders of the Indignado movement discussed political issues, in popular talk shows that acted as springboards for their popularity. *La Tuerka* presented itself as the “voice of the citizenry”, against the media responding the “caste”, a term used by Podemos and the 5 Star Movement in Italy to refer to political and financial elites in thrall to neoliberalism.

In these and other similar cases, we see that populist movements have often been preceded by the establishment of alternative news channels using social media to establish a movement of opinion embracing an anti-establishment discourse, which constituted the necessary base for a populist mobilisation. This construction of social media as the people’s voice goes hand with a parallel trend: the turning of social media into a virtual rallying point for supporters, favoured by the aggregation logic embedded in social media’s algorithms.

Social media as the People’s rally

Social media have also favoured the rise of populist movements for the way in which they have come to be perceived as means to aggregate otherwise dispersed people. Social media discussions have provided a sort of gathering spaces where the “lonely crowds” produced by the hyperindividualism of neoliberal society could come together, in a sort of fusion reaction where the atoms of the broken social networks could be reformed into a new collective identity and sense of community and solidarity. The role of social media in rallying the people is something that derives from the aggregation functionalities that are embedded in their architecture. This is a dynamic by which timeline algorithms tend to focus the attention of users on few news items matching their interests, but also in the backend software behind social network sites, which organises users according to a number of demographic characteristics, relevant keywords, attitudes and tastes, so as to be more easily grouped for the purposes of targeted advertising. From the view point of user experience this aggregative functionality provides a counterbalance to the experience of extreme information overload that is the hallmark of the social media era, and the fact that users would hardly be able to sift through and manage all the posts written by their contacts, especially at a time in which the number of

Facebook friends seems to have no ceiling. This filter-by-interest dynamic and the “economy of attention” associated with it, is the trend underlying the widely discussed filter bubble effect of social media (Pariser, 2011). This is a process by which Internet is fragmented into different “sphericules”, and a consequent polarisation of public opinion ensues, where various factions, sharing little or common ground on fundamental issues, vie for for user attention. Such trend favours the rise of online crowds of like-minded individuals of the kind that constitute an important element of support for the rise of populist movements.

It is significant that in the era of the Internet and social media the crowd is making a surprising comeback in political and social discourse, and quite a surprising one, since ours is not an era we often associated with crowds, but rather with neoliberal individualization of which social media constitute a perfect manifestation. The online crowd is evoked in a number of expressions such as crowd-sourcing, crowd-funding or the “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki, 2005), all underlining the new possibilities for mass collaboration that are available online. However, the rise of online crowds has not only been seen as an unmitigatedly positive phenomenon. Wael Ghonim the admin of the Facebook page Kullena Khaled Said that was pivotal during the Egyptian revolution, as for example criticised what he describes as a “mobocratic” tendency which tends to favour “sensational content that more eyeballs will turn toward”. This tendency is favoured by social media's algorithms that tend to concentrate attention on few items, especially those that have attracted a large number of interactions in the seconds immediately after being published, a tendency that, Ghonim argues, tends to favour sensationalist content. This trend is evident in the way some of the most outrageous propaganda channelled by Donald Trump via his personal Twitter account has managed to attract enormous public attention, often diverting the public eye from more serious kinds of content. However, it can be argued that the mobocratic tendency of social media as described by Wael Ghonim does not necessarily lead to sensationalist and stupefying communication, but can also serve progressive populist ends.

The crowd-building functionalities of social media appears to provide a perfect complement for populist movements' efforts to unify an otherwise highly divided people. As Laclau has argued populist movements often make use of an ‘empty signifier’ (2005), allowing to fuse together disparate demands in a single platform and campaign. They attempt to overcome a situation in which that people are fragmented along class and identity lines, trying to make people aware of the fact that they share a common interest and that they share common enemy. The mobocratic tendency of social media and the way in which it makes certain content items and figures acquires a disproportionate visibility can lend itself to the unifying task of populist politics. This is seen for example in the virality acquired by populist memes, both on the Trump and on the Sanders campaigns, and the way in which they acted as a source of collective identity, giving these populist candidates enormous personal visibility on social media, larger than the one enjoyed by mainstream politicians, as well as the one enjoyed by their own parties. The personalisation and celebrity element of social media thus provides a sort of focal point around which the crowd can gather and millions of disaffected individuals, otherwise deprived of common organisational affiliation, can come together to recognise their shared interests and desires.

The most notorious cases of online populism come from trolling attacks. A case in point is the #GamerGate incident, an intense campaign of hate speech launched from message boards as 4chan and Gamasutra against women accused of betraying the videogaming community and the true ethos of videogamers, which ended up constituting a base of support for Donald Trump's election campaign. A very different mobocratic logic was at play in Bernie Sanders' supporters use of Facebanking, a technique that allowed to invite people en masse to Facebook events connected to the campaign. Despite their ideological differences what these examples share is the populist objective of gathering large numbers of people online, in order to turn them into a militant support base and exploit their capacity for online mass collaboration. This militant rank-and-file is strategic to secure a broad outreach of their messages, due to the important role played by ordinary internet users as “spreaders” of the message.

We can thus conclude that social media have politically slipped out the hands of their creators. They rose to embody the hegemony of the neoliberal ethos, its combination of economic entrepreneurialism with a respect for diversity and pluralism. They have ended up supplying a perfect channel to convey a populist rhetoric to a world in which individuals, their social constraints unshackled by neoliberalism, have become lone wolves who do not stay on their own, but rather go on forming packs of wolves, i.e.

online crowds preying on all those actors and figures they are perceived as being part of the establishment by which they feel wronged and betrayed.

This does not mean that establishment candidates cannot use social media, but that the underlying narrative and orientation of social media runs counter to the key traits of establishment politics, including moderation, formality, and pretence of universal rationality. Conversely, social media tend to favour populist movements that make no mystery about their antagonism to the establishment and which are better able to exploit the suspicion towards authority and elites that has come to be associated with the culture of social media. The future will tell if the populist potential of social media will only favour rightwing populists as Donald Trump that are currently in the lead in defining this trend, or whether a more progressive and hopeful form of populism, such as the one championed by the likes of Podemos, Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders will prevail.

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